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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Vulnerability and Resilience in Lawrence
Hill's *The Illegal*

Sara Casco Solís

Dña. Ana María Fraile Marcos

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Tutora: Dña. Ana María Fraile Marcos

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Signature

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the precarious conditions endured by defenceless refugee seekers impelled to risk their lives in other countries. Lawrence Hill emphasizes the role of literature as an effective means to portray an extremely current situation in the world. In his recent novel, *The Illegal*, Hill depicts the hardships and mistreatment of non-status refugees who are deprived of their civil rights as human beings. While becoming vulnerable subjects at the mercy of the wealthy, asylum seekers are treated as inferior beings without dignity and identity. In the novel, non-status refugees become invisible and dependent subjects without a voice in a strange land. However, Hill turns this inhumane life of humiliation into one of empowerment by portraying a character, Keita Ali, who is able to survive in a strange land where his presence is considered illegal.

Key words: Lawrence Hill, *The Illegal*, Canadian imaginary, precarious, refugee, asylum seekers, non-status migrants, hospitality, civil rights, nation-state, citizenship, vulnerable subjects, resilience, invisibility, migration, empowerment, illegal.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo se examinan las condiciones de precariedad sufridas por refugiados indefensos y carentes de estatus social que arriesgan sus vidas en otros países. Lawrence Hill trata de destacar el rol de la literatura como un medio eficaz para la representación de una situación muy actual hoy en día. En su última novela, *The Illegal*, Hill muestra las adversidades, el maltrato y el abuso que reciben diariamente los refugiados sin estatus tras ser privados de sus derechos civiles como seres humanos. De esta manera, se convierten en sujetos vulnerables a merced de las personas acomodadas, quienes los tratan como seres inferiores sin dignidad e identidad. En la novela, los refugiados son personas invisibles y dependientes sin derecho a revelarse. Sin embargo, Hill desafía esa vida inhumana y humillante a través del personaje de Keita Ali, capaz de sobrevivir en un lugar desconocido donde su presencia es considerada ilegal.

Palabras claves: Lawrence Hill, *The Illegal*, precariedad, refugiado, refugiado sin estatus social, hospitalidad, derechos civiles, Estado-nación, ciudadano, sujetos vulnerables, resiliencia, invisibilidad, migración, superación, ilegal.

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To categorize a person as illegal is thoroughly offensive to the concept of humanity. I use it to represent the worst of human thinking about the plight of migrants and refugees.

—Lawrence Hill

1. INTRODUCTION

The Canadian imaginary that conforms a sense of national identity relies to a great extent on the recognition and protection of basic human rights, including those of claimant refugees. These foundational tenets are guaranteed by the state through the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which holds firm the notion that “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.” Nevertheless, respect for human rights is consistently threatened worldwide by constructing all sorts of physical and verbal barriers. The use of the pejorative term ‘illegal’ to refer to asylum seekers and undocumented migrants embodies one of those barriers diminishing the humanity of undocumented people and submerging individuals in an unbearable situation of vulnerability, precariousness and discrimination (Nyers 126). The celebrated Canadian author Lawrence Hill portrays this socio-political vulnerability suffered to various different degrees by present-day minorities in Canada and elsewhere. Born into a family of American immigrants—a black father and a white mother—who came to Canada in 1953, Hill was influenced by his parents’ work in the human rights movement. This concern of his has a strong presence in several works including his outstanding 2007 neo-slave narrative novel *The Book of Negroes* (published in the U.S. as *Someone Knows My Name*), which won several awards, including The Rogers/Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize. Following the wide international distribution of the aforementioned novel, Hill continues writing on issues of identity, belonging and abuses of human rights. These concerns

are significantly present in his 2015 dystopian novel *The Illegal*, which was chosen for the celebration of Refugee Rights Day and the winner of Canadian Reads 2016.

Keita Ali, the protagonist of *The Illegal*, is a refugee and a marathon runner from Zantoroland, a fictitious island state where he has lost his parents due to the repression exerted by the dictatorship at work there. Alone and desperately in need of money to pay a ransom for his sister, who has been kidnapped in the U.S. where she is studying at present, Keita flees to the wealthy nation of Freedom State. Refugees are unwelcome there and categorized as ‘illegals,’ living in constant fear of facing deportation back to their homeland. Although the protagonist must hide his identity there, he succeeds in running local races in order to win cash prizes and save his sister. Hence, *The Illegal* portrays the complexities of a refugee seeker compelled to leave his homeland and at the same time his hope and ingenuity to overcome his problems. This paper aims to bring to the forefront the role of literature in tackling issues of utmost currency and conveying the situation of vulnerability endured by defenseless refugee seekers striving to survive in a foreign country. It suggests that the narration of the plights of displaced people—such as this story’s protagonist—may instigate an ethical transformation of society.

2. KEY CONCEPTS AND THEIR CONTEXTUALIZATION VIS-À-VIS THE CANADIAN IMAGINARY.

This section offers an analysis of the theoretical framework upon which Lawrence Hill’s *The Illegal* has been constructed, as well as the conceptual bases at the core of this novel. Displaying a special interest in the description and depiction of undocumented asylum seekers, the title of the novel reflects Hill’s personal critique of the lack of recognition of asylum seekers as human beings with rights on the part of both the institutions of a given nation-state, but also of the individuals who enjoy the rights granted by citizenship. Instead,

asylum seekers' "undocumented existence reduces them to [what Giorgio Agamben defined] as 'bare life'" (qtd in Fraile 109). Consequently, the expression and portrayal of vulnerability is a crucial aspect in this novel, where the human condition is ultimately revealed as precarious. Its marginalized characters are affected not only by a corporeal vulnerability but also by a tangible psychological pain, which is provoked by their categorization as 'illegal.' In the novel, the term illegal is used, for instance, by officials of the Freedom State government with the intention of dehumanizing immigrants and discouraging ordinary people from considering them to be human beings with rights: "None of them [non-status refugees] have permission to enter Freedom State. This makes them Illegals, which makes them criminals" (Hill 68). The stigma that the term illegal carries is based on the misconception that being in another country without permission is a criminal act.

Paradoxically enough, this crucial confusion in the use of the word illegal is also provoked by the misconception of two terms, say, refugee and migrant, which are used interchangeably nowadays in both public discourses and the media. However, it is important to give particular attention to this topic before analyzing the situation of refugees in *The Illegal*. According to the UNHCR Refugee Agency,

Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as "refugees" with access to assistance from States, UNHCR, and other organizations.
(Edwards)

However, there is a clear distinction between refugees and migrants as can be appreciated in the following definition of the term migrant provided also by the UNHCR Refugee Agency:

Migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for

education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. (Edwards)

Thus, while migrants may be driven to leave their countries due to economic factors, refugees are compelled to escape from their own countries in order to survive. Their families are torn apart, their homes are destroyed and with nothing left, their only hope is to find safety in other countries in which they only face yet more stringent restrictions, as will be further illustrated in the following chapter. Consequently, they are agents of change not only in their own lives but also in the lives of other people in that they end up contributing to the economic growth and standard of living of their destination country. However, as stated before, the majority of them are not protected by international law since they cannot enter political life or enjoy other rights of citizenship.

However, despite this harrowing situation, most of them attempt to survive in this prejudiced society by turning their vulnerable situation into one of empowerment: that is, by exercising what we call resilience. This term was central to Marianne Hirsch's choice of the presidential theme "Vulnerable Times" for the 2014 MLA convention in Chicago. Resilience is considered to be the antithesis of vulnerability and "it appears in the studies of the environment, social ecology, political economy, medicine and developmental psychology as [a term] that helps address the predisposition of people and systems to injury and understand their ability to recover from shock and catastrophe" (Hirsch 1). Consequently, we can apply this term to the situation embraced by present-day asylum claimants in Canada and elsewhere. *The Illegal* depicts several moments—especially at the end of the novel—where asylum seekers do not only recover from their terrible state of exclusion but also experience a deep change in the very society that enables them to become stronger in order to confront their new reality. In being able to overcome his inhumane and degrading life as refugee, Keita Ali's experience is an epitome of non-status refugees in the world today. Hence, by focusing on

Hill's protagonist's experience of moving across a border, the following chapter will further analyze how the novel develops these concepts throughout.

3. LIVING WITHOUT STATUS IN LAWRENCE HILL'S *THE ILLEGAL*: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE.

The Illegal opens with the following words, which portray the presumably representative life of its protagonist, Keita Ali, one of the millions fleeing persecution from their countries: "GO HOME. Running was the smoothest dance in the world . . . Keita—a stranger in a strange land whose only transgression was to exist in a place where his presence was illegal" (Hill 1). In this fragment, a clear division appears between the two places that configure Keita's identity, that is to say, his "home" in Zantoroland and Freedom State, "a strange land" for him. For the protagonist of the novel, moving away from his roots means escaping from corruption and blending into a wealthy country engaged in a crackdown on all undocumented refugees. As such, it is worth-noting that running is a metaphor in Keita's life: he has to flee from immigration officials who could deport him, while at the same time he has to win marathons to buy food and pay a ransom for his sister. As Hill states in his interview for CBC News running is about survival in this novel (Collaco). Such crucial action—that implies mobility—is what gives way to a portrait of the principal reasons that instigate refugees to flee in Hill's work. Throughout the novel, people from Zantoroland describe their own country as: "a great, great country. Beautiful mountains. Fast runners. Kind citizens. But our government is corrupt—it kills people" (Hill 345). Corruption, together with the violence implied therein, is therefore the main motive that spurs Keita to move away from Zantoroland, a country transformed into a war machine.

However, this mobility originates Keita's precarious situation, who is rejected from the moment he crosses the border: "Enough Is Enough," "Send 'Em Back," "Who Invited

Them?” (Hill 66). By channeling vexation in the form of trite soundbites, citizens reveal their intolerance toward individuals whose personal histories remain unknown. This feeling provokes profound psychological scars in non-status refugees, as they have to contend with the boundary between the self and the other, which is perceived, as Ulrich Beck puts it, as an unbridgeable “strangeness” (qtd. in Fraile 102). As a result of such persistent exclusion, vulnerability amidst defenceless people who do not dare manifest their personal worries, is unavoidable. This is precisely the situation in which we find the protagonist of *The Illegal* in Freedom State:

He had to force back his tears. He had no family with him. No friends. Not a soul who cared the least for him. It was an odd feeling to walk the streets of a country knowing that no single person knew your name or a thing about you—or would notice if you lived or died. (Hill 57)

In this passage, Keita is aware of the vulnerability and desolation that refugees have to confront in other countries where they are “anonymous” individuals whose feelings and needs are considered negligible (Hill 59). Besides being excluded from the entitlements of citizenship, Keita is an invisible and superfluous soul to the state. As Nyers points out in his essay “Community without Status: Non-Status Migrants and Cities of Refuge,” “non-status immigrants are said to occupy a ‘space of nonexistence’ and a ‘space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation, and repression’” (127). This situation, along with Keita’s emotional distress, highlights his vulnerability as well as that of any undocumented migrant.

In addition, Hill portrays the non-status refugees’ “space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation and repression” (Nyers 127) through the recreation of an ethnic community on the outskirts of Freedom State named AfricTown. This is the place where all non-status refugees from many diasporas can seek asylum despite the growing hostility of the country. The name chosen for the community emphasizes racial difference. Therefore,

AfricTown, the only place where asylum claimants can find a haven, is juxtaposed with the rest of the country, stressing the difference between citizens and non-status refugees, and the tangible inequality in their living conditions: “AfricTown was like a whole other country. An island of poverty, right inside one of the world’s richest countries” (Hill 123). The polarity between these two places reveals that the people in AfricTown are at the mercy of the wealthy, whose only purpose is to “tear down AfricTown” (Hill 237), disregarding the refugees’ status as human beings. Thus, by portraying an active community on the borderland comprised of people deprived of freedom, the author attempts to render the reader familiar with the dangers and the precarious nature of illegality.

Indeed, the description of the poor conditions experienced by Keita can be taken as a shocking example of how undocumented immigrants are forced into an underground and invisible life:

He finally fell back to sleep, only to dream of having no place to stay in Freedom State and being bounced from flophouse to brothel to park bench until he finally had no choice but to take refuge in a massive sewer. It was a cavernous culvert deep underground. You could sleep in the concrete vault, but you knew that the sewage could come flooding at any time, and when it came, it came torrentially. (Hill 242)

Here, Hill points out one of the major hurdles faced by non-status refugees, that is, their inability to lead a stable and dignified life. They are treated as mere objects “bounced” from one place to another divested of their humanity and dignity without having protection in public spaces. As Nyers claims, “non-status immigrants live in constant fear of detention, deportation and surveillance by the authorities” (127), which increases their restlessness. Keita’s forced mobility—“he lives and eats here and there” (Hill 163, 234)—illustrates this point, as well as the constant risk and deprivation of basic rights to which refugees seekers are

exposed. This marginalization allows us to understand the level of deprivation and injustices suffered by refugees and how it makes their integration in society impossible.

Such exclusion is extremely aggravated by how non-status refugees are denied access to public services, which in turn provokes the perception that they are inferior or less than human beings. As a result, this makes people from Freedom State think that they are justified to treat refugees as objects devoid of feelings and basic needs. Hill portrays key moments throughout the novel where the protagonist is deprived of the vital services, such as health care and education. As an example, Keita suffers diabetes but because his disease cannot be treated by the hospital due to his non-status condition, they just give him “some free supplies. Enough to keep [Keita] going a few months” (Hill 295). Like Keita, people living in AfricTown may be considered the epitome of the marginalized population as they do not have access to public education in Freedom State. Instead, children can only receive free lessons given by volunteer non-status people in AfricTown, who may not be prepared for it. The fact that access to education is out of reach for those who have no legal status is also experienced by the protagonist, who is not permitted to consult books or gain access online in public libraries without “national citizenship card and a proof of residency” (Hill 228). Therefore, while being denied the right to education, non-status people are deprived of their rights as human beings in order to provoke a feeling of discomfort that might drive them to leave the country.

In line with this argument, Sean P. Hier and B. Singh Bolaria suggest that reducing black refugees to the status of illegal people reinforces the assumption that blacks are “naturally inferior” and can be exploited for “the purpose of acquiring resources and cheap labour” (122). Their illegal status contributes to the stony silence of non-status refugees who are led to accept conditions of slavery in order to survive. Being protected by neither international nor national law, they can be exploited by anyone, in fact, “everybody wanted a

piece of [them]” (Hill 233). In this respect, not only are refugees deprived of their most basic civil rights, they are also not permitted to have a voice. This creates a situation of anxiety aggravated by the constant threat and fear of returning home. In the novel this can be appreciated in the numerous extortion messages received by Keita when he is blackmailed after his sister is lost track of in the U.S.: “if payment is not forthcoming, there will be consequences . . . just a reminder to provide \$15,000 by June 22. This amount is required, in full and on time, to secure the safety of your sister.” (Hill 232, 233). Such an appalling situation therefore traps the protagonist in an unbearable predicament that leads him to resolve to hide away in order to survive: “to stay alive, he [Keita] had only one option: to go into hiding” (Hill 56). The resulting vulnerability of existing at the mercy of others is supported by Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, in which she claims that “we are subjects to death at the whim of another, [a reason] for both fear and grief” (Butler XII). At this point, the vulnerability caused by the state’s refusal to grant asylum to undocumented immigrants is not resolved by the invisibility of hiding, but rather only temporarily assuaged.

However, despite being denied their civil rights and being treated as invisible subjects without permanent home in other countries, some non-status people manage to empower themselves and overcome all hardships. This is Keita’s case, whose reaction to adversity when he runs is “to go faster when you are tired and ready to give up” (Hill 251). Such metaphor demonstrates Keita’s resolve to ignore people who want to threaten and mistreat him. Indeed, his only purpose is to protect and save his sister, to the extent that “he decided that he would rather die of a heart attack than not spend every ounce of energy winning [the last] race for her” (Hill 368). Hirsch’s understanding of resilience is rendered here, since Keita wants to stop the silencing of refugees seekers and sheds light upon the corruption of Freedom State government in order to achieve a well-deserved place for non-status refugees.

Furthermore, Keita does not only turn his vulnerable situation into one of empowerment, but he also achieves an ethical transformation of society. Every member of the government is unmasked with the help of refugee supporters, which makes society—and, in fact, the reader—aware of the injustices and harassments endured by refugees. At the end of the novel Keita gets his citizenship papers. This happy ending demonstrates the protagonist's successful journey from vulnerability to resilience.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the novel's treatment of non-status people and asylum seekers sets up a parallel with the present-day situation of refugees and other migrants. As a result, the reader is made aware of the difficulties endured by those who are spurred to risk their lives in order to find a safe place to live in, and upon arrival in a new country, are excluded from the rights of citizenship. Hill takes the reader on a revealing journey through which the corruption and injustices embraced by a fictitious government are unravelled. This journey starts with the controversial title chosen by the author in order to criticize the superiority of citizens who label non-status refugees 'illegals.' Such a denomination is unjust since people cannot be considered illegal, instead they can only be "accused of doing something illegal" (Hill 71). This unfairness demonstrates the verbal hardships and discrimination suffered by non-status refugees from the moment they cross the border. As a result, refugee seekers occupy a precarious place, AfricTown, where they are deprived of their civil rights as human beings and denied their dignity and identity, turning them into utterly vulnerable beings. However, in the midst of such conditions, some people, like the novel's protagonist, challenge societal expectations of refugees as passive and dependent people and undertake a journey of courage and survival in a 'strange land.' Hence, there is no better way to finish this journey from

vulnerability to resilience, than through the words that Keita uses to win the race of his life:

“Want to shatter your opponent’s confidence? Just when he starts to hurt, you sing” (Hill 4).

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